

## Families of men in notorious syphilis study speak up for vaccination

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**What's the news:** Less than two-thirds of Black adults say they have been vaccinated against COVID-19 or plan to do so ASAP, and the painful legacy of the U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee and other instances of medical racism is often considered to be one reason for uncertainty in Black communities.

A short-form documentary featuring the descendants of the men involved in the U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee sets the record straight on what happened, what has changed and what current generations can learn from the experience to build confidence in public health within Black communities, especially as it relates to the COVID-19 vaccines.

The U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee was conducted from 1932 through 1972 by the United States government. During the study, more than 600 Black men around Tuskegee, Alabama, were made to believe that they were receiving free medical care when they, in fact, were not receiving treatment.

More than 100 men died from syphilis or its complications by the end of the study, which continues to have an important impact on perceptions and trust to this day. Yet over time, there have been widespread misunderstandings of the study, and many family members of the men involved feel their narratives have been unfairly portrayed throughout the years.

For example, some people believe that researchers injected the men with syphilis, but that's not true. Researchers told the men they had come to Tuskegee to cure "bad blood," but never told them they had syphilis, and the government doctors never intended to cure the men.

Now descendants of these men are working to reframe the narrative and build trust through public service and public health. The film includes seven stories introducing the men of the U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee as fathers, grandfathers, uncles and pillars of the

community. Shedding light on how the descendants have worked to reconcile the shame and tragedy of the study, the stories illustrate how understanding the past can help create a better, more informed present and a thriving future.

The film features stories from a generational mix of the study's descendants. It was created by director Deborah Riley Draper, production company Coffee Bluff Pictures and creative agency JOY Collective in conjunction with Voices for Our Fathers Legacy Foundation and Black Coalition Against COVID-19.

**Why it's important:** According to the Kaiser Family Foundation COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor poll, 68% of all Americans surveyed have been vaccinated or will do ASAP. Only 54% of Republicans are vaccinated or plan to do so soon, and just 58% of adults 18–29 years old have been immunized or have plans to get vaccinated quickly. For Black adults, the combination of those vaccinated or planning to do so ASAP is 65%.

“The loving human beings involved in the U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee were our fathers, grandfathers, uncles and cousins. Unfortunately, until recent years, references to their humanity were not detailed in medical research or academic writings, and some information and beliefs about the study continue to be unknown, ill-perceived and misleading,” said Lillie Tyson Head, president of the Voices for Our Fathers Legacy Foundation.

“We should not allow anyone who needs and wants a COVID-19 vaccine to not have their questions answered—or be denied the opportunity to get it, like the men in the U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee,” Tyson Head added. “We must protect ourselves and each other.”

**Learn more:** The documentary film is part of the Ad Council and COVID Collaborative's COVID-19 Vaccine Education Initiative and the “It's Up To You” campaign.

The AMA COVID-19 vaccines guide for physicians offers evidence-based messaging guidance and best practices for consideration in external communications about the safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines that have been authorized in the U.S.

In addition, AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, MD, is taking part in the Ad Council's “Knowledge is Power” COVID-19 vaccination campaign. Swipe through this Instagram post to see Dr. Harmon explain how vaccines will protect most people from getting seriously ill with COVID-19.

The AMA, American Hospital Association and American Nurses Association also released a 30-second video public service announcement urging all Americans to “ask questions, follow the science and get vaccinated.”